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The Tea Parties and the Future of Liberty

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on June 6, 2010, during a Hillsdale College cruise from Rome to Dover aboard the Crystal Symphony.

Barack Obama was inaugurated on January 20, 2009. Within a month he signed a \$787 billion “stimulus package” with virtually no Republican support. It was necessary, we were told, to keep unemployment under eight percent. Overnight, the federal government had, as one of its highest priorities, weatherizing government buildings and housing projects. Streets and highways in no need of repair would be broken up and repaved. The Department of Transportation and other government agencies would spend millions on signs advertising the supposed benefits of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. I saw one of them on Roosevelt Island in Washington, D.C. It boasted that the federal park would be receiving a generous grant to facilitate the involvement of local youth in the removal of “non-indigenous plants.” In other words, kids would be weeding. We need a sign to announce that? And this was going to save the economy?

Then there was American Recovery and Reinvestment Act project number 1R01AA01658001A, a study entitled: “Malt Liquor and Marijuana: Factors in their Concurrent Versus Separate Use.” I’m not making this up. This is a \$400,000 project being directed by a professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The following is from the official abstract: “We appreciate the opportunity to refocus this application to achieve a single important aim related to our understanding of young adults’ use of male [sic] liquor (ML), other alcoholic beverages, and marijuana (MJ), all of which

confer high risks for experiencing negative consequences, including addiction. As we have noted, reviews of this grant application have noted numerous strength [sic], which are summarized below.

So what were those strengths? “This research team has previous [sic] been successful in recruiting a large (>600) sample of regular ML drinkers.” Also, “the application is well-written.” Well-written? With three spelling mistakes? But who am I to judge? As for the other strength, there is no question that the team’s recruitment had been strong. But is that really a qualification for federal money? After all, they were paying people to drink beer!

These same scholars were behind a groundbreaking 2007 study that used regression analysis to discover that subjects who got drunk *and* high were more intoxicated than those who only abused alcohol. The new study pays these pot-smoking malt-liquor drinkers at least \$45 to participate. They can buy four beers per day for the three-week project—all of it funded, at least indirectly, by the American taxpayer.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when President Obama visited Buffalo in May, he chose to highlight *other* stimulus grants. On the other hand, he could have pointed out that the beer money goes right back into the economy. Think of all those saved or created jobs! In any case, the findings of this new study are expected to echo those of the first study, which found: “Those who concurrently use both alcohol and marijuana are more likely to report negative

consequences of substance use compared with those who use alcohol only.” Reading results like this, I tend to think that those who concurrently get drunk and high are also far more likely to believe the stimulus is working.

And have I mentioned that the estimated cost of the stimulus was later increased from \$787 billion to \$862 billion? That’s a cost underestimate of nearly ten percent. Anyone in private business who suddenly had to come up with ten percent more in outgoing funds than previously anticipated would likely go out of business.

All of this set the stage for a revolt. The accidental founding of the Tea Party movement took place in February 2009, when CNBC commentator Rick Santelli let loose a rant against the stimulus package, and in particular the proposal to subsidize what he called “the losers’ mortgages.” He proposed a ceremonial dump of derivative

securities into Lake Michigan, and a few hours later a website popped up calling for a Chicago Tea Party. The video clip raced around the Internet, and it was soon clear that many average Americans were furious about the massive new spending bill and the plan to subsidize bad mortgages.

The stimulus was bad, but by itself it was probably not enough to sustain an entire movement. This is why the larger context matters: Under President Obama, federal spending has been growing at an unprecedented pace. We are adding \$4.8 billion to the national debt every day. The long-term viability of Medicare and Social

Imprimis (im-pri-mis),
[Latin]: in the first place

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Security isn't merely uncertain—as so many analysts would have us believe. In fact, their failure is a sure thing without structural changes. By adding a massive new entitlement with the health care bill, we are simply going to go broke faster. Americans understood much of this even before Mr. Obama was elected.

Consider this story from the recent presidential campaign: In July 2008, Republican nominee John McCain stopped in Belleville, Michigan, to participate in a town hall. After several friendly questions, he took one from Rich Keenan. Wearing a shirt with an American flag embroidered over his left breast, Keenan told McCain that he would not be voting for Obama. But then he said: "What I'm trying to do is get to a situation where I'm excited about voting for you."

The audience laughed, and many in the crowd nodded their heads. Keenan explained that he was "concerned" about some of McCain's views, such as his opposition to the Bush tax cuts and his views on the environment. Keenan allowed that he was grateful that McCain had begun taking more conservative positions. But he concluded: "I guess the question I have, and that people like me in this country have, is what can you say to us to make us believe that you actually came to the right positions? We want to take you to the dance, we're just concerned about who you're going to go home with." The audience laughed again. McCain laughed, too, but then he grew serious: "I have to say, and I don't mean to disappoint you, but I haven't changed positions." He defended his vote against the Bush tax cuts and, at some length, reiterated his concerns about global warming. Later, he went out of his way to emphasize his respect for Hillary Clinton and boast about his work with Joe Lieberman, Russ Feingold and Ted Kennedy.

I talked with Rich Keenan after the town hall. He described himself as a conservative independent. He said he often votes Republican but does not consider himself one. He added, "I do think that there are millions of Americans out there like me who are fairly conservative,

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probably more conservative than John McCain, and I think a lot of them are concerned about what's going to happen if he does get elected." Keenan was right. There were millions of people out there like him—conservatives, independents, disaffected Republicans, and many of them stayed home on election day. These people form the heart of the Tea Party movement.

In recent years, the Republican Party has seen its approval levels sink to new lows. In 2005, 33 percent of registered voters told Gallup they considered themselves Republican. By 2009, that number was 27 percent. The number of voters who identified themselves as independent showed a corresponding rise. But what's interesting is that over that same time-frame, the number of voters self-identified as conservative stayed relatively constant: 39 percent in 2005 and 40 percent in 2009. (Self-identified liberals constituted 20 percent of respondents in both 2005 and 2009.) So even as the number of self-identified Republicans declined and the number of self-identified independents grew, the number of self-identified conservatives was constant. Of course, it's too simple to postulate a one-for-one swap, but the trend seems clear. The Tea Party movement arose in an environment in which a growing number of Americans believed neither party was voicing its concerns.

All of this has liberals in the mainstream media and elsewhere flummoxed. At first they were dismissive. Think of the footage of Susan Roesgen of CNN going after Tea Party enthusiasts at a Chicago rally, suggesting they were irrational and stupid. And consider a few of the many other examples:

- > Eugene Robinson of the *Washington Post* wrote: "The danger of political violence in this country comes overwhelmingly from one direction—the right, not the left."

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The vitriolic, anti-government hate speech that is spewed on talk radio every day—and, quite regularly, at Tea Party rallies—is calibrated not to inform but to incite.”

- > MSNBC's Ed Schultz said: “I believe that the Tea Partiers are misguided. I think they are racist, for the most part. I think that they are afraid. I think that they are clinging to their guns and their religion. And I think in many respects, they are what's wrong with America.”
- > Actress Janeane Garofalo: “This is about hating a black man in the White House. This is racism straight up. These are nothing but a bunch of tea-bagging rednecks.”
- > Comedian Bill Maher: “The teabaggers, they're not a movement, they're a cult.”

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> Perhaps the most stunning comment came from prominent Democratic strategist Steve McMahon: “The reason people walk into schools and open fire is because of rhetoric like this and because of attitudes like this. The reason people walk into military bases and open fire is because of rhetoric like this and attitudes like this. Really, what they're doing is not that much different than what Osama bin Laden is doing in recruiting people and encouraging them to hate America.”

We've seen this before. On November 7, 1994, the *Washington Post* ran an article about the loud, hateful fringe on the right: “Hate seems to be drifting through the air like smoke from autumn bonfires. It isn't something that can be quantified. No one can measure whether it has grown since last year, the 1980s, or the 1880s. But a number of people who make their living taking the public's temperature are

convinced it's swelling beyond the perennial level of bad manners and random insanity. It's fueled, they say, by such forces as increasingly harsh political rhetoric, talk radio transmissions, and an increasing sense of not-so-quiet desperation." The next day, Republicans took Congress.

Are today's Tea Party supporters on the radical fringe? In a *National Review*/McLaughlin Associates poll conducted in February, six percent of 1,000 likely voters said that they had participated in a Tea Party rally. An additional 47 percent said they generally agree with the reasons for those protests. Nor is the Tea Party movement "monochromatic" and "all white," as Chris Matthews claimed. Quite the contrary: the *National Review* poll found that it was five percent black and 11 percent Hispanic.

Perhaps that poll could be dismissed as the work of a right-leaning polling firm and a conservative magazine. You can't say that about the *New York Times* and CBS. Their poll, which has a long history of oversampling Democrats, found that Tea Partiers are wealthier and better educated than average voters. It also found that 20 percent of Americans—one in five—supports Tea Parties. That's an awfully big fringe.

Other polls confirmed these findings: a *Washington Post*/ABC poll found that 14 percent of voters say the Tea Party is "most in synch" with their values; 20 percent say Tea Parties are "most in tune with economic problems Americans are now facing." The most interesting poll, in my view, came from TargetPoint Consulting, which interviewed nearly 500 attendees at the April 15, 2010, Tax Day rally in Washington, D.C. Here are some results:

- > Tea Partiers are united on the issues of debt, the growth of government, and health care reform.
- > They are socially conservative on the one hand and libertarian on the other, split roughly down the middle.
- > They are older, more educated, and more conservative than average voters, and they are "distinctly not Democrat."

This new information complicated the mainstream media's narrative about the Tea Party movement. This was not a fringe. Nancy Pelosi, who had earlier dismissed Tea Parties as "Astroturf"—meaning fake grassroots activism—revised that assessment, telling reporters that, in fact, she was just like the Tea Partiers.

This brings us to the present day. The president's approval ratings are low, and Congressional Democrats' are even worse. Members of the president's party are not only running away from him in swing districts, but even in some relatively safe ones. Many analysts are suggesting that control of the House of Representatives is in play, and perhaps even that of the Senate.

This dissatisfaction flows directly from the president's policies and those of his party. It is not simply "anti-incumbent," as many of my press colleagues would have it. This voter outrage—and it is outrage, not hate—is specific and focused: Americans are fed up with big government and deeply concerned about the long-term economic health of their country. The stimulus was unpopular, and most Americans do not believe it's working. Obama's health care plan was unpopular when it passed. The American people understood the rather obvious point that it wouldn't be possible to cover 30 million additional people, improve the care of those with insurance, and save taxpayers money, all at the same time.

Does all of this add up to big Republican gains in November? Not according to the mainstream media. The *Boston Globe*'s Susan Milligan recently wrote: "The Tea Party movement is energizing elements of the Republican Party and fanning an anti-Washington fervor, but the biggest beneficiaries in

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DID YOU KNOW?

Bradley J. Birzer, professor of history at Hillsdale College, has published a new book entitled *American Cicero: The Life of Charles Carroll* (ISI Books, \$25).

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the mid-term elections, pollsters and political analysts say, could be the main target of their anger: Democrats.” CBS News reported the same thing just a few days later. What nonsense! I think there is little question that the Tea Parties—and the enthusiasm and energy they bring—will contribute to major Republican gains in November.

One final point: For many Tea Partiers, the massive and unconstitutional growth of government is the fundamental issue. But I think there's something deeper, too. After her husband had won several primaries in a row in the spring of 2008, Michelle Obama proclaimed that for the first time in her life she was proud of her country. It was a stunning statement. It also foreshadowed what was to come: Since Barack Obama took office in January 2009, he has devoted much of his time to criticizing his own country. He apologizes for the policy decisions of his predecessors. He worries aloud that the U.S. has become too powerful. He has explicitly rejected the doctrine of American exceptionalism.

And this is not mere rhetoric. For the first time ever, the U.S. is participating in the Universal Periodic Review—a United Nations initiative in which member countries investigate their own nation's human rights abuses. The State Department has held ten “listening sessions” around the U.S. during which an alphabet soup of left-wing groups aired their numerous grievances. These complaints are to be included in a report that the U.S. will submit to the United Nations Human Rights Council. It will be evaluated by such paragons of human rights as Burkina Faso, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, China, and Cuba.

When President Obama spoke before the United Nations General Assembly in September 2009, he declared that a world order that elevates one country or group of countries over others is bound to fail. So he's changing that order. If his domestic policy priority is the redistribution of wealth, his foreign policy priority seems to be the redistribution of power.

Most Americans don't agree with the president's priorities. And many of these Americans are now active in the Tea Party movement, a movement that has succeeded in starting a serious national conversation about a return to limited government. ■

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